

# Spirit of *creativity*



The key to good health and happiness, believes Melbourne artist Margaret Gurney, is following your passion and doing what you truly love.

WORDS SARAH HOLLINGWORTH

PHOTOGRAPHY JARROD BARNES

**WHEN 19TH CENTURY** German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche crafted the phrase ‘that which does not kill me makes me stronger’, the very idea of adversity being a source of strength seemed ludicrous. More than a century later, it’s an aphorism that Melbourne artist Margaret Gurney could have done without, but she admits adversity has shaped the person she has become.

The past is not something Margaret, now in her mid-60s, is particularly keen to dwell on – “it’s all about the future,” she says. But to examine the woman she is today, it’s necessary to reflect on the many challenges and, indeed, achievements of yesterday.

The daughter of Australian war artist Alex Gurney, Margaret was just 11 when her father, 53, died from a heart attack. Margaret says that although her father, also creator of the legendary ‘Bluey and Curley’ cartoon, was a fabulous artist with a creative spirit, financial matters were not his strong suit.

“My mother, just 43 years old and not tertiary educated, had to find work to support the family,” she says, describing her as an incredibly intelligent and industrious woman. “It was 1955 and she had a real struggle, so she was very determined this wasn’t going to happen to me.”

Indeed, her mother’s doggedness assured Margaret of a tertiary education; something she could “fall back on” in times of need.

Surrounded by art and spending endless hours drawing on the floor of her father’s studio, Margaret was destined for a life of creativity – it was part of her “essence”, she says.

It was no surprise, then, that she chose to go to art school, where her mother stipulated she study the more practical graphic design course.

“I wanted to do painting,” remembers Margaret, “but my mother delivered the ultimatum: ‘you need to do graphic design so you can support yourself’. So I did.”

Four years later, graduating top of her class, Margaret went to work in the heady world of advertising as an art director, later moving to Channel 0 (now Channel 10) as a graphic designer. During her career, she worked on successful campaigns, such as the iconic 1960s’ advertisement ‘A hard-earned thirst needs a big cold beer’, and designed flip cards (a once-common production technique) for television.

Margaret might have fulfilled her mother’s ambitions to be educated and financially self-sufficient, but being a woman in the 1960s’ workforce, she says, was tough. Australia was riding the second wave of feminism, but discrimination and exploitation in the workplace were still rife.

“I was determined that being looked over because I was a female wouldn’t be my destiny,” says Margaret. “Just about every job I have done, I have been the first woman in the role.”

With positions as a graphic designer, art director, lecturer and arts education manager

(among others), Margaret’s mother would be proud of her daughter’s working history. But it has not been without challenge.

At the age of 43, just like her mother some 30 years earlier, Margaret was left widowed with two children, aged 14 and 16. Though there was little to celebrate during that time, Margaret was eternally grateful for her education and a solid career.

When her husband was diagnosed with cancer – just weeks after her mother had died – Margaret had been preparing for her first-ever art exhibition. However, with medical appointments, treatment and eventual around-the-clock care, all artistic endeavours were cast aside. And, as a consequence of grief and mourning, it was many years before Margaret was able to put brush to canvas again.

“Once my mum died, I was the orphan,” she says. “Then my husband died and it really blew my life apart.”

Unlike some artists who channel their grief into their work, Margaret says she has never been ‘inspired’ by suffering. “I don’t know why, but I close down,” she says. Instead, Margaret says painting is part of her recovery process. “Once I started painting again, I knew I was getting better.”

Today, the artist truly believes if you have the passion to follow your heart, you will be a happier person. And, “when you’re a happier person, you’re a healthier person”.

For Margaret, this means being immersed in art – be it sessional teaching at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), painting Kakadu landscapes, participating in the local Pink Lady Art Exhibition or visiting galleries. She paints with a deep passion and, she says, “for the sheer love of such a creative outlet”.

Having lost both her parents, husband and all her siblings, Margaret is acutely conscious of the need to maintain a healthy existence.

Walking every day along the beach and swimming in the sea during summer, the sights and sounds of nature are a great source of inspiration and inner contentment. “Spiritually, I find it such a lovely thing to do,” she says.

Good mental health, she believes, also contributes to good physical health. “Self-identity is very important,” she says. “I came out the other side [of adversity] feeling defined by who I am as a person, not who I’m married to or what job I’m doing.”

Margaret would also like to think she’s come out the other side with her sense of humour intact. “If it’s a choice of laugh or cry,” she says, “I always hope I’ll laugh.” ☺



## Embracing the artist within

When talking about art and creativity, Margaret Gurney likes to reference American writer-director Steven Soderbergh, who won the Best Director Oscar in 2001 for the film *Traffic*. During his acceptance speech, Soderbergh said: “I want to thank anyone who spends a part of their day creating. I don’t care if it’s a book, a film, a painting, a dance, a piece of theatre, a piece of music – anybody who spends part of their day sharing their experience with us. I think this world would be unliveable without art.”

They are sentiments that resonate strongly with Margaret, who believes that everyone has a creative side and that people should embrace and nurture this creativity.

### To get in touch with your inner artist, Margaret suggests:

- Listen to your creative side (even if you think you don’t have one!).
- Don’t be afraid to try something new – be open-minded to exploring all areas of inspiration.
- Try different pursuits until you find one that gets the creative juices flowing.
- Look for group classes – they often bring together like-minded people and are a great source of support.
- When researching classes, ask if you can look around the centre or sit in on a class.

Margaret Gurney’s artwork, and details of her current and upcoming exhibitions, can be viewed at [gurneyart.com.au](http://gurneyart.com.au)